

AN EXPLANATION

OF

SOME OF THE DIFFERENCES

BETWEEN

The Society of Sons of the Revolution

AND

The Society of Sons of the American Revolution.

PHILADELPHIA

1899.



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## AN EXPLANATION OF SOME OF THE DIFFERENCES.

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THAT there are serious differences between the Societies of Sons of the Revolution and Sons of the *American* Revolution is, unfortunately, a fact with which many members of both societies are already familiar. The letter of Mr. J. Marshall Brown,\* and the editorial article reprinted from *THE REPUBLIC*, a newspaper specially friendly to the Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, present with reasonable fairness some of the points of difference between that society and the older society, known as Sons of the Revolution.

The Society of Sons of the Revolution originated in New York, in 1876.† In 1883, the present New York Society of Sons of the Revolution was formed, Mr. John Austin Stevens, one of the original members of the organization in 1876, becoming its first president. In April, 1888, a society in affiliation with the New York society was organized, known as the Pennsylvania Society of the Sons of the Revolution. In March, 1889, a few weeks before the celebration in New York of the Centennial of the Inauguration of General Washington as President, a few members of the New York society, seeking greater personal prominence than they then enjoyed in that society, conceived the notion of forming a New Jersey society, without authority from or conference with the New York or the Pennsylvania societies. This New Jersey Society of Sons of the Revolution was organized March 7th, 1889, with seven members, and at its first meeting, without conference with New York or Pennsylvania, appointed a committee, of which one of its two origi-

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\* See page 7.    † See page 11.

nators was chairman, to "invite" the descendants of Revolutionary sires to organize State societies and elect delegates to meet himself and associates at Fraunces' Tavern, in New York, April 30th, 1880, and organize a *National society*.\*

A number of prominent gentlemen, not knowing the irregular methods employed by the member referred to, met in response to this peculiar invitation. Without any constituencies behind them they proceeded to organize, what they called, a "National Society of Sons of the *American* Revolution," quietly appropriating the name of the original society with the simple insertion of the prefix "American" before "Revolution;" and at the same time they rewarded the originator of the scheme with the title of "vice-president at large." Since that time this "National society" has had three presidents; and the "vice-president at large," now a "Vice-President General of Sons of the American Revolution," has been engaged as a sort of missionary, regardless of expense, organizing with more or less undue haste State societies in every conceivable part of the country. The greater part of his valuable time has been freely given to this noble work; and his every movement and utterance has been freely, if not lavishly, telegraphed to the newspapers. "Magnificent insignia" has been manufactured, recently reduced in price to meet the popular demand, and no effort has been spared to gather in with lightning rapidity the greatest possible number of new members.

The New York and Pennsylvania societies of Sons of the Revolution, with the conservatism natural to their Eastern localities, wished to pursue their way in peace, and to grow gradually by a principle of strict qualification and careful selection. But they have not been allowed this simple privilege. For months they have been solicited to submit themselves to the jurisdiction of the more recent society, and to "accept the olive branch" of humiliation offered by the magnanimous Vice-President General and his associates. They have been assailed as "preventing harmony," and it has been coolly

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\* See page 12.

stated that "nothing can now retard union between the Sons of the American Revolution and the Sons of the Revolution *except a lack of patriotic spirit on the part of the Societies S. R.*"\* Thus insult is added to injury. Rival societies have been set up, or attempted to be set up, in New York and Pennsylvania.† In one of these instances an eminent gentleman, prominent in national politics and famous as an impromptu orator, and not wholly without Presidential aspirations, has been elected president of a State society, though only an "honorary member," and (it has been understood) without any ancestral record entitling him to *actual* membership in the society!

The New York and Pennsylvania societies, and the more recent society of the District of Columbia in affiliation with them, have preserved a dignified silence. But while these societies decline to make any official reply to the many newspaper attacks upon them, it is well that some of the facts should be known, and it is the purpose of the present writer to aid in making them known.

The aims of the two societies appear to be quite different. The original Society of Sons of the Revolution is conservative and disposed to move slowly on well-settled lines. It is not seeking members, while gladly welcoming all who are of unquestioned eligibility and of such personal qualifications as will make them useful and respected members. It does not, however, "go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in." It employs no missionaries, and utterly prohibits any discussion of party politics within its borders. It seeks quality rather than quantity of membership. It does not accept members on hearsay testimony, but requires actual proof of the requisite qualifications. Its aims are historical, literary, social, and patriotic, and its members, while of the most diverse political sentiments, are united purely for general patriotic purposes and antiquarian research.

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\* Editorial in THE REPUBLIC of May 14, 1890.

† See pages 12 and 14.

The objects of the Society of Sons of the *American* Revolution are, in many respects, quite different. Some of its members wish to make an impress on the politics of the country, "to save the schools"—whatever that may mean—and to speedily enroll such a large membership that it may be recognized as a "power" in the land. It is continually boasting of "rapid growth." Its haste is undignified, to say the least, and unnecessary, unless it is desirous to become a "power" before the next Presidential election. Incidentally it seeks "to promote social intercourse among its members," but, as one of its advocates claims that there ought to be secured "a membership of twenty-five thousand in the State of Ohio alone," it is not easy to see how social intercourse and historical research could be practically maintained in so large a body.

It is freely admitted that the Society of Sons of the American Revolution now contains many distinguished members, of which any society might be proud. It is believed, however, that most, if not all, of such members were ignorant of many of the facts which attended the foundation of the society they joined. It is further believed that they were misled by the originator of this National society, whose combination of pertinacity, vanity, and effrontery is unequaled, and whose insensibility to the usages of polite life is manifest in every movement.

The New York society now numbers over six hundred and the Pennsylvania society about two hundred members. Both societies have printed full alphabetical lists of their members, with the relationship, name, and rank of the ancestor from whom the member is descended. Both societies may well be proud, not only of the distinguished Revolutionary patriots who are represented, but of the character and standing of the members through whom the ancestors are represented. No such complete and satisfactory lists, it is believed, have been issued by the societies of the later organization. Those of Revolutionary descent are free to choose between the two societies. It is matter of regret,



however, that the name of the elder society should have been so closely imitated.

The writer is a member of the Pennsylvania Society of Sons of the Revolution, but holds no official position therein, and what has been written is in no way an official utterance. It is a brief statement of some facts which are within his knowledge, and his reason for writing is that his patience has been more than exhausted by the publication of wholly unfair statements respecting the society of which he has the honor to be a member. What he has written has been in the interest of truth and fair play, and without suggestion from or consultation with any one. The following quotation from an original letter of Thomas Jefferson, in the writer's collection of autograph Revolutionary letters, seems peculiarly appropriate at this time: "Truth and reason can maintain themselves without the aid of coercion, if left free to defend themselves. But then they must defend themselves. Eternal lies and sophisms on one side, and silence on the other, are too unequal."

PHILADELPHIA, May 30th, 1890.

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The following letter is reprinted from *THE REPUBLIC* (a weekly newspaper of New York City) of May 21st, 1890:—

#### STRICTNESS IN MEMBERSHIP.

*Editor of the Republic,*

SIR:—I do not know as I have any right to say anything in regard to the struggle now on between the S. A. R. and S. R., inasmuch as I am not a member of either society. Neither do I wish to boast my ancestry. I will say, however, to explain why I write to you, that I am descended from two soldiers of Bunker Hill, and so, naturally, feel an interest in the welfare of any society formed of the descendants of Revolutionary sires.

In reading *THE REPUBLIC*, many points have risen in my mind on which I would like to have the explanation of *THE REPUBLIC*. In the first place, I do not understand what there is to quarrel about, or why the S. A. R. should attack the S. R. foot, horse and dragoons with all the animosity with which the ancestors of the members of each society fought red coats; and, on the other hand, I do not see why the S. R., if all that has been said in *THE REPUBLIC* is true in regard to conciliatory messages, &c., should stand out so sturdily and obstinately against the fusion of the societies.

Why, if the S. R. is of so little importance, should the S. A. R. pursue them so constantly to perfect an amalgamation of the two societies? Why, if the gentlemen composing the S. R., do not want to join the S. A. R., should they not be left alone to do as they please in the premises? I do not see why an older organization should be in honor bound to come into another organization of similar object, and, by so doing, have to give up their insignia, name, badges and, more than that, to give up some of the strictness of their rules for what shall constitute eligibility.

I have read well and carefully the constitutions of both societies, and can see that that of the S. R. is more strict in regard to membership, or rather in regard to what shall be called qualifications for membership. In this, it is in the right. The membership of any society supposed to be formed from the descendants of any class, should be made up of those and those only who can clearly prove their descent from that class; and the more exacting the conditions, the more will a membership therein be sought and prized. Persons will come to the society, instead of the society presenting the picture of soliciting for membership.

The country had waited for over a hundred years for such a society to be formed. The S. R. had started such a society; it had a healthy growth, organized well and conservatively, with the proper safeguards against the admission of ineligible persons; had adopted colors and insignia

which cannot be equaled, for their colors are those of our fathers' uniforms, and their insignia makes the common soldier the principal figure, and is fashioned after no foreign badge of nobility. As I said before, the S. R. had a healthy growth. Its organizers, feeling that there was danger of the crowding in of those not properly qualified, wished to keep the membership restricted to those and only those who could clearly prove their descent; they wished in fact to control the management until the society had such a start, and until such a feeling had been inculcated in the minds of the membership to inspect with jealous care every application for admission. Their natural conclusion was that in time the S. R. would swell into a national organization the same as any secret or other organization grows, spreading its boundaries as it gets older. The S. A. R. went to work and formed a rival society, and then came with demands that the S. R. should give up name and insignia to them. Of course, the S. R. was indignant and refused to have anything to do with the S. A. R. I do not see how they could do otherwise and preserve their self-respect.

I do not mean to assume that the organizers of the S. A. R. were in any degree dishonest, or were actuated by other than honest motives; but I do believe that a large membership and a widespread organization should be a secondary item; that the first consideration should be high ground in the matter of what might be considered the qualifications for membership, the manner in which evidence should be given, verification of evidence of descent, &c. To illustrate, I notice that in the blank application for admission to S. A. R., it is left optional with State societies whether the evidence for membership shall be taken on oath before a notary public or other officer, or not. This is not so with the S. R., and, according as a State society may be ambitious for a large membership or not, the door is left open for totally unqualified persons to enter, upon no better evidence than their "say so," into a society, a membership in which ought to be the proudest boast of any Yankee citizen.

I mean to say that it is possible in the new societies S. A. R., formed in the West, the officers of which are themselves ignorant of their duty in regard to close inspection, for any one who can trace a pedigree back to Revolutionary times to become members of the society.

THE REPUBLIC has said in every copy I have so far noticed that it is the impartial, unprejudiced mouthpiece of both societies; and although I have so far seen very little that was any defense of the S. R., I have taken the liberty of writing you, only after long thought on the subject, trusting it will be printed, as you have always solicited the views of descendants on the subject of the two societies.

I am for the joining of the societies, but want to see it done without the S. R. having to give up their honored colors, simple and appropriate insignia, or their just and proper restrictions in regard to admission.

I write this in great haste on my way to the South, and trust you will overlook mistakes, as I have dictated in haste and have not had time to inspect closely or correct.

J. MARSHALL BROWN.

CHICAGO, ILL., May 13th, 1890.

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[Extract from an editorial in THE REPUBLIC of May 21st, 1890.]

THE S. A. R. and S. R. differ radically on many important points. Name, insignia, and badge are three of them, and yet after all, these matters do not equal in importance one other, namely, the principle at the basis of the organization of the united order. If the united societies are to be formed for purely social objects, for pleasant reminiscences of the era in which our forefathers established Independence and representative government, for banquets, for the personal distinction of being recognized as the descendants of men who played a part bravely and well in the trying times of one hundred years ago, and for the preservation of relics,

documents, and records, then perhaps the aristocratic principle might be all well enough. The united societies might then limit their membership as much as they please and make their order exclusive—a sort of junior Cincinnati—an association of patriotic gentlemen for the mutual enjoyment of each other's cultivated society. But if the united order is to be not only that, but more, if it is to impress American ideas upon the great mass of our fellow-citizens—whether of native or foreign birth—who are negligent of American ideas, if it is to save the schools, teach patriotism to the young, and unite the men of the South and of the North in patriotic sentiment, then THE REPUBLIC believes it must be something besides an exclusive and aristocratic association. It must be, in the best sense, popular, must hold frequent meetings, and must be inspired with the spirit of representative institutions in its whole management, local and national.

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#### FIRST ORGANIZED IN NEW YORK IN 1876.

THE Society of the Cincinnati, founded at West Point by the officers of the Army of the Revolution in 1783, originally limited its membership to descendants of officers in the elder branch, and, with a temporary and short variation from the rule, has ever since maintained its restriction.

The approach of the Centennial Anniversary of American Independence is an appropriate time for the formation of a society on a broader basis, which may include all descendants of those who served in the Army of the Revolution.

The undersigned have formed themselves into a society under the name of "The Sons of the Revolution," and invite the membership of all who, like themselves, are descendants of officers or soldiers of the Revolutionary Army. The object of the society is to take part in the Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia.

A meeting will be held for organization at the rooms of the New York Historical Society on the morning of Tuesday

the 22d of February next (1876), at 12 o'clock. All persons having a right and desire to become members may send their names and the names of those they represent, to the undersigned, Box 88, Station "D," New York Post Office.

JOHN AUSTIN STEVENS.

#### ORGANIZATION OF NEW JERSEY SOCIETY.

THE New Jersey Society was organized at Newark, N. J., March 7th, 1889. The organization was perfected through the efforts of Mr. William O. McDowell and Mr. Josiah Collins Pumpelly, both being at that time members of the New York Society of Sons of the Revolution.

These gentlemen, together with Messrs. Paul Revere, John Lawrence Boggs, Jr., George Blight Halsted, Benjamin Myer, and Charles E. McDowell, were the founders of the New Jersey Society. It was at this first meeting that steps were taken to set on foot a plan for the formation of a National Society. A series of resolutions were passed, whereby a committee of three was authorized to invite the descendants of Revolutionary sires, wherever found, to organize sister societies in the various States of the Union, and to elect delegates who should convene in New York City on April 30th, 1889.

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[Editorial in PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, April 18th, 1890.]

#### RIVAL SONS OF THE REVOLUTION.

THE Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, a rival of the Society of the Sons of the Revolution, is canvassing the State of Pennsylvania with the idea of utilizing the centennial of the death of Benjamin Franklin for the establishment of a Pennsylvania branch and of gathering in members. A circular letter signed by William O. McDowell, "Vice-President General," has been distributed, apparently

with the idea of drumming up recruits. The Pennsylvania Society of the Sons of the Revolution was established April 3d, 1888, and now numbers one hundred and sixty-six members. Its president is Major William Wayne, great-grandson of "Mad" Anthony Wayne, Pennsylvania's great Revolutionary hero, and himself a gallant soldier of the Army of the James. Its members are gentlemen of character and of high standing in this State. Male descendants of persons who aided in the establishment of the American Union during the contest with England are eligible to membership in this society, and any one so eligible, we should think, would prefer to join it rather than to embark upon a new venture, which is uncalled for and whose outcome is uncertain, since it is launched upon a field already fully occupied.

To establish two societies having precisely the same purpose and erected on precisely the same foundations, is only to weaken the resources and strength of both. There is not room for two such societies, even if there were any occasion for another one, which there is not. The best material available in this State has already gone towards building up the Pennsylvania Society of the Sons of the Revolution. It has undertaken an historical work of some importance in the collecting, from country attics and other places, of manuscripts relating to the Revolutionary War, and in the marking of the numerous places in Pennsylvania made historic by the operations of Washington's army or by the presence of other patriots of the period. In this work the people of Pennsylvania should lend the society assistance by communicating to Mr. John W. Jordan, the registrar of the society, at the hall of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, No. 1300 Locust Street, Philadelphia, information concerning any letters or writings relating to the Revolutionary War, in order that copies of them may be made.

It has been said of the rival organization that in its anxiety to gain members it has not been particular to insist that the claims to membership of applicants should be well founded. If this be so the movement becomes ridiculous. It appears

from its circular that it does not require a sworn statement of such claims preliminary to admission, and it is, perhaps, unfortunate for this pushing organization that the value of a membership which should be the source of an honorable pride, does not depend upon the ease with which admission to the society can be gained or a fictitious claim be made to answer the purpose of a sound one. The rival society is a mistake. It should never have been started, and now it ought to be merged in the one already existing.

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[Editorial in PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, April 21st, 1890.]

#### SONS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION.

THE *Inquirer* acknowledges the receipt from William O. McDowell, "Vice-President General" of the Sons of the American Revolution, of three communications since Friday last. The first announced the intention to form a branch of this society in Pennsylvania; the last announces that so many recruits have been brought in that at least four chapters have already been established in this State. There is a wild Western land-boom appearance about "Vice-President General" McDowell's methods, which, to say the least, seem peculiar when applied to the formation of a society whose foundation is supposed to rest upon historical services rendered during the Revolutionary War. Indeed, "Vice-President General" McDowell is in such a hurry to boom his society that in his circular letter he spells the name of General Greene, "Green," and that of Muhlenberg, "Muhlenburg," which does not indicate that degree of familiarity with American history which is desirable in every pupil of the public schools, and without which no man should be eligible to the office of "Vice-President General" of a society bearing the name of "Sons of the American Revolution."

We regret that "Vice-President General" McDowell, by scattering broadcast throughout Pennsylvania his circulars



asking pretty much everybody to come into his Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, should be engaged in counteracting the good influences of the public schools and the school histories wherein the names of Generals Greene and Muhlenberg are properly spelled. Error is a rapid-growing plant even when the most energetic efforts are made to keep it down, and is as hard to uproot as the Canada thistle. In Pennsylvania, where there is a Greene County and where the name of Muhlenberg is very familiar, a society whose chief officials are responsible for scattering the seeds of ignorance is not likely to be looked upon with much favor. On the contrary, it is likely to be visited with public disapprobation for engaging in what resembles a cowboy's assault upon the work of Thaddeus Stevens and Governor Ritner in establishing a free school system in this State.

If there should be anybody in Pennsylvania who wants to join "Vice-President General" McDowell's society it is apparent that he will be received with open arms, and it seems probable that a society which is so peculiar in its spelling of historical names will not put his eligibility to any severely critical test. The only thing that the Pennsylvanian needs to be warned against is the mistaking of "Vice-President General" McDowell's society for the Pennsylvania Society of the Sons of the Revolution, whose members, escorted by the City Troop, observed the anniversary of the battle of Lexington yesterday by attending divine services at Christ Church.





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